

## Transnational *Hindutva* Networks in United States <sup>1</sup>

Over the last several decades, a transnational network of American groups affiliated with Hindu nationalist organizations has embedded itself in the Indian diaspora in the United States.<sup>2</sup> This network deserves special attention in the context of the recent debate around citizenship laws in India that target religious minority groups, specifically Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

The National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Constitution Amendment Act (CAA) and the protest against it cannot be understood in isolation from the growing prominence of the *Hindutva* ideology in India. Through the ideological lens of *Hindutva*, India is an aspiring Hindu state, which would include the Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs as organically deriving from India, but not Muslims, because Islam is characterized as an alien and invading religion.

The citizenship laws also assert that all non-Muslims excluded in the nationwide National Register of Citizens (NRC) would re-qualify for citizenship via Constitution Amendment Act (CAA), while the Muslims living in India for generations would not. Instead, the Indian Muslims could be subject to severe punitive consequences including “statelessness, deportation, or prolonged detention”.<sup>4</sup>

Under such circumstances, and in the context of the riots in North East Delhi that experts have categorized as pogrom against Muslims<sup>5</sup>, the purpose of this testimony is two fold.

First, it argues that it is unlikely that transnational Hindu nationalist network<sup>6</sup> based in the United States is immune to *Hindutva*, the ethnonational exclusionary political philosophy propagated in India by *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), the India-based Hindu nationalist paramilitary organization founded in 1925.<sup>7</sup> Reference to

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<sup>1</sup> This testimony is written by a scholar of South Asia.

<sup>2</sup> This network includes the *Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh* (HSS), *Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America* (VHPA), *Sewa International USA*, *Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation-USA* among others. The Overseas Friends of the Bharatiya Janata Party - USA (OFBJP), though not a tax-exempt group, also works closely with this network.

<sup>3</sup> On December 10, 2019, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) *passed* in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of Indian parliament). Two days later, it *cleared* the Rajya Sabha (the upper house of Indian parliament) and, after quickly receiving the assent of Indian President Ram Nath Kovind, became law.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24781&LangID=E>

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Prof Ashutosh Varshney, an expert on communal riots in India <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/02/india-muslims-delhi-riots-danger/>

<sup>6</sup> The transnational network of RSS is not limited to the US. The first branch of RSS outside India was formed in 1947 in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Tanganyika and Zanzibar. Some full-time members of the RSS who later worked in the United Kingdom and in North America had also worked in Kenya.

<sup>7</sup> RSS is the head of an overarching family (*parivar*) of affiliates coordinating Hindu nationalism of numerous specialized offshoots and sections. It has various specialized branches including a

*Hindutva* is crucial in the context of CAA and NRC because *Hindutva* forms the ideological basis for the exclusion of Muslims from Indian nationhood.

Second, this testimony also contends that by liberally invoking Hinduism in their programs, this US based transnational network makes the false equivalence between their political ideology of *Hindutva* and Hinduism. Any conflation of Hinduism and *Hindutva* violates the inviolable right of every Hindu to define and practice Hinduism outside the exclusionary politics of *Hindutva*.

The HSS USA (*Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh* USA), formally registered in the United States in 1989 as a tax-exempt, non-profit organization, offers a good case to illustrate the nature of ties between the transnational Hindu nationalist networks in the US on the one hand and the RSS and *Hindutva* on the other.

The HSS describes itself as “ideologically inspired by the RSS vision of a progressive and dynamic Hindu society”.<sup>8</sup> There are overlapping organizational structure, cultural practices and celebration schedules between the two.<sup>9</sup> Existing research (Jaffrelot and Therwath 2010; Therwath 2012) shows that RSS started systematic effort to establish overseas branches back in the 1950s.<sup>10</sup> Even earlier when the RSS was banned in India, first in 1948 for the assassination of Gandhi and then again in 1975-77, the HSS UK played an active role in raising funds to keep RSS infrastructure running (Goyal 1979).<sup>11</sup>

Scholars have dug up archival evidence to demonstrate that RSS was directly inspired by European fascism, especially Mussolini’s Italy, most evident in their ideas of preserving the purity of bloodline of the Hindu race (Casolari 2003). RSS was also implicated in the tragic assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, who was an inspiration to

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religious wing (the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad*, VHP, the World Hindu Council), a student wing (the *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad*, ABVP, All India Student Association), a workers wing and a tribal wing. It also has its own political party - the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP, the Indian People’s Party). The entire structure is called the Sangh Parivar (literally, ‘the family of the Sangh’, short for *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*). RSS functions through a dense network of about 50,000 local shakhas, or branches, where cadres provide physical and ideological training to over 2.5 million activists. Many scholars argue that more than ideological overlap, HSS seems to be an overseas arm of RSS, with the name change only signifying a move away from India.

<sup>8</sup> In the FAQ section of its website HSS clarifies the relationship between HSS and RSS. See <https://www.hssus.org/faq>. The HSS USA website also mentions that “Many people who have participated in HSS and RSS activities have been inspired to create and work in other social service organizations worldwide” suggesting overlapping activities between the two analogously named organizations.

<sup>9</sup> For example, RSS focuses on Nihyuddha – an ancient Indian martial art tradition, which HSS South Carolina is shown to teach in this video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kaUQe8aVi-4>. The festivals emphasized in HSS and RSS include Varsha Pratipada (Hindu New year), Raksha Bandhan, Vijay Dashami, Makar Samkranti, Guru Puja, and Hindu Unity Day. See <https://www.hssus.org/festivals#festivals>.

<sup>10</sup> In 1957, the RSS appointed Lakshman Shrikrishna Bhide as the officer responsible for international relations and made him ambassador-at-large for hindutva.

<sup>11</sup> Goyal (1979) wrote that a secret registry was kept at RSS headquarters in Nagpur. It listed members who were planning to settle abroad so that they could be put in touch with one another and encouraged, through Chamanlal, to either join or set up a *shakha*

Nelson Mandela and Dr Martin Luther King Jr. among others. The CIA has classified the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) that belongs to the larger family of *Hindutva* organizations known as *Sangh Parivar*, as a militant organization.<sup>12</sup>

The militant history and the exclusionary ideology of RSS that inspires HSS USA naturally alienate many Indian Americans of different faiths and political persuasions, and, in the current context, particularly distress those who have close friends or family adversely affected by the rising *Hindutva* politics and the citizenship laws in India.

The Muslims in India have been attacked for what they eat, how they speak, whom they marry and what they wear.<sup>13</sup> *Hindutva* groups, ideologically primed (Savarkar 2016) to relentlessly question the loyalty of Muslims to the project of nation-building in India<sup>14</sup>, have incited many of these attacks. In further polarizing the two communities, RSS and affiliated organizations have also argued that the Hindus were being reduced to second order citizens in India, while the Muslims were being appeased continuously.<sup>15</sup>

Having identified this as a malady of “national self oblivion”, the *Hindutva* groups then prescribe social cohesion through “strong and united Hindu society” as the only cure. But this is unity without diversity in sharp contrast to the unity in diversity that forms the foundation of democracy in India.<sup>16</sup> When national unity is made contingent on

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<sup>12</sup> The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal have been classified as religious militant outfits in CIA's World Factbook. The two organizations have been categorized under 'Political pressure groups' in the document. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/cia-classifies-vhp-bajrang-dal-as-militant-religious-outfits-1260635-2018-06-14>

<sup>13</sup> *Hindutva* condemns eating beef as anti-Hindu, which incited lynching of poor Muslim men suspected of consuming or transporting beef. Muslim men marrying Hindu women were vilified as a concerted attempt to meddle with the purity of Hindu race (Love Jihad) and increase Muslim population in India. Their community-specific sartorial choices have been discussed to identify anti-CAA protestors by the highest echelons of power. Highlighting the differences between majority Hindus and minority Muslims in their everyday lives amplifies the marginalization of the Muslims in India.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Savarkar wrote “Mecca to them is a sterner reality than Delhi or Agra. Some of them do not make any secret of being bound to sacrifice all India if that be to the glory of Islam or could save the city of their prophet.”

<sup>15</sup> The vision and Mission of RSS states that “The Congress leaders’ policy of appeasement of the Muslims was but one symptom of the malaise. It is an irony of history that - even after paying the ultimate price of vivisection of their cherished motherland - the Hindus have been treated as second-order citizens by successive governments of post-independence Bharat.” The malaise refers to the erosion of national identity in the face of colonial rule that created clerks and brown sahibs eager to please the British and disrespectful of ancient cultural heritage of Hindus. From <http://rss.org/Encyc/2012/10/22/rss-vision-and-mission.html> accessed on March 1, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Over the three days of the 'outreach' program, entitled 'Bhavishya ka Bharat: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh ka Drishtikon (India of the Future: A Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh Perspective)' and held between 17 and 19 September, 2019 in Delhi, Mohan Bhagwat said "According to us the entire society is a Hindu society. We have no enemies, neither in the country or outside it." He added that "The RSS is trying to unite all Hindus... All Indians are Hindus by identity. Hindutva is the balance between all religions." Although there are many internal contradictions in this statement to decode it precisely, it seems in line with Savarkar's idea of Hinduness being the real organic culture of India that defines the core of nationhood. See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLf\\_YxKJ-wE&t=4194s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLf_YxKJ-wE&t=4194s)

obscuring India's diversity, followers feel emboldened to fly the saffron flag of *Hindutva* on a mosque, which supporters interpret as a service to the nation rather than an affront to the core values of India.

The exclusionary political philosophy of RSS is actually a recipe for rupturing the social cohesion in India, by widening social divisions, weakening inter-community trust and inciting fear and suspicion among Hindus and Muslims in India. Given their strong ideological ties, it is unclear how the HSS resists and stays immune to *Hindutva* propagated by RSS in India.

HSS and RSS also share organizational structure and operational methods.<sup>17</sup> Both HSS and RSS operate through a network of meeting centers, referred to as Sakhas (Branches), and a committed group of members as well as full time volunteers.<sup>18</sup> Like the RSS, HSS also refers to itself as *Sangh*, and identifies organizing the Hindu community and preserving, practicing and promoting Hindu ideals as its primary mission.

The ruling party in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is a political wing of the RSS formed in 1985.<sup>19</sup> The current top leadership of the party was groomed in the RSS tradition of *Hindutva*. It is no surprise that both the HSS and the RSS describe themselves as social organizations and not political ones. But scholarly research on the electoral success of BJP has also highlighted how the various charitable fronts of RSS use social service to garner electoral support for BJP in remote parts of India, particularly from the marginalized communities who would not otherwise vote for the BJP platform (Thachil 2014).

Like RSS, HSS employs similar cultural repertoire, focusing on teaching Hindu universal family values, yoga, and languages, to what they portray as fragments of India which are at risk of transforming, adapting and evolving abroad. This attracts many unsuspecting immigrant families interested in introducing their American children to Indian heritage to HSS (Burllet, 2001, Mathew and Prashad 2000).<sup>20</sup>

By assuming the role of flag bearer of Hinduism and its rich cultural traditions in the US, the HSS and its various affiliates constantly conflate Hinduism and *Hindutva*.

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<sup>17</sup> Other notable components of this transnational Hindu nationalist network in the US are the VHP of America and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad Overseas (VHPO), or World Hindu Council, Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation-USA, Sewa International USA. In addition, the Overseas Friends of the Bharatiya Janata Party - USA (OFBJP) and Hindu American Foundation are also connected to this transnational network. But this brief testimony focuses mostly on the HSS .

<sup>18</sup> The members are known as *swayamsevaks* for men and *sevikas* for women. In addition, HSS recruits full time volunteers. Some volunteers called *vistaraks* commit to volunteering several years full-time. Some volunteers called *pracharaks* commit their whole life for HSS work. Day to day activities are managed by a team of volunteer officers appointed by Board of Directors as per its bylaws. For more details, see <https://www.hssus.org/faq>

<sup>19</sup> RSS founded the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) as its political arm in 1951. After 1975-77 State of Emergency in India, BJS merges with a number of other parties to form Janata Party. Former BJS members reconvened to form BJP in 1980, which contested its first election in 1984.

<sup>20</sup> The cultural repertoire employed in these organizations is also steeped in anti-Minority rhetoric, as well as caste and gender inequalities, which is outside the scope of this testimony.

However, not all Hindus subscribe to Hindutva. In fact, Hindus are among the fiercest critique of Hindutva.<sup>21</sup> It is well known that Savarkar, who first coined the term *Hindutva*, was an atheist himself, and treated as *Hindutva* distinct even from Hinduism (Savarkar 2016).

In addition, it is in the context of an immigrant Hindu minority in the US and their struggles around visa status and permanent residency that various affiliates in the transnational *Hindutva* networks recruit many unsuspecting Hindus immigrants in the United States. In other words, Hindutva groups prey upon the insecurities and difficulties of immigrants (and their children) trying to find their place in American culture. They present a soft front but then, once they get people's attention and allegiance, they radicalize them into the exclusionary ethnonationalism of *Hindutva*. Many of these recruits then participate in supporting the political agenda of BJP in the US, including in the support rallies for CAA.

The transnational Hindu nationalist networks in the US invoke the American tradition of religious pluralism to claim space for minority Hindu cultural practices in the US, while repudiating the same ideas of religious pluralism and tolerance in how they treat Muslim minorities in India.

Under such circumstances, grassroots organizations, made up of women and men with no prior activist experience, have come forward to organize activities around interfaith solidarity and harmony. These nascent initiatives aim to build bridges among various communities in the Indian diaspora while also creating a space for religious freedom for all. It is crucial that Hinduism establishes itself in the diaspora as distinct from *Hindutva*. In their attempt to counter *Hindutva*, these nascent organizations also aim to act as a support network to rally around those within the Indian diaspora that are most vulnerable to the onslaught of *Hindutva* on their families and friends in India and elsewhere.

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<sup>21</sup> For example, Hindu temples have given formal statements against the CAA and Hindus have tried to organize themselves against Hindutva. See for example, <https://www.sadhana.org/> and <https://gipausa.org/>

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